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ABSTRACT

Children are capable of good thinking, asking perceptive questions, ferreting out implications, making applications, formulating conclusions, and making valid predictions and evaluations. Evidence indicates that these capabilities can be improved by teaching children about questions and questioning. Before such questioning strategies have much impact in the classroom, however, it will be necessary to include instruction about questions and questioning in preservice and inservice courses and workshops for teachers. On-the-spot discussion guided by a skillful teacher is probably one of the best techniques for developing children's ability to react mentally with meanings embedded in printed symbols. The teacher, however, must carefully prepare for each discussion and be ready with astute questions and remarks, ready to follow and guide discussions into proper channels, ready to step back when children are taking over in ways conducive to growth in their thinking processes, and ready to step in with a question or remark that will stimulate further mental activity and afford subtle guidance in arriving at a sound judgment. There seems to be no good reason why such comprehension instruction cannot begin at the primary school level. (RBW)

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"Classroom Applications of Questioning Strategies"

Lillian Martin

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CS 007 770

Come with me down the hall of an elementary school where several basal reading lessons are being conducted at the prescribed time.

We hear: "Look at the picture

Where is Bill?

Read this page to find out what Bill said.

What did Bill say?

When will Mr. J. come?

Read the next 2 pages to see if Mr. J came.

Did Mr. J come?

What did Bill do?

Read what Mr. J said.

In the next picture I see ..."

Sound familar? Yes, I'm afraid all too much so. Those routines aren't really very stimulating.

While we were in the process of organizing our thinking for this project, I listened to my own routine for teaching basal reading at the primary level. I was guilty of the "who, what, when, where" pattern about 75% of the time but I have to give myself credit for frequently asking such questions as:

"What do you think Bill will do now?

Why might Mr. J be late?

What do you think will happen if he doesn't come?

What would you do if you were in this situation?"

But still, with the somewhat improved questioning strategy this was a teacher dominated environment - in fact it could be said that the thinking that was going on was under the control of the teacher, and not the kind that exemplifies creation, innovative problem solving thinking that explores alternatives.

Historically the question/answer/feedback pattern has been an accepted

instructioned technique and there is no doubt that it has provided both teachers and pupils with innumerable satisfying experiences. When the pupils responded with the expected answers the teacher felt pleased that they had reiterated exactly what was expected and the children were rewarded with a smile and an A, O, 99, or whatever other symbol was in current use at that time in grade books to show a high level of competency.

But what about the quality of questions that were asked? What kind of mental activity was necessary to produce those right answers? Was the learner motivated to generate some opinions of his/her own? Had he/she had any experience that was similar? Could he/she formulate some alternatives? How might this activity help him/her solve other problems?

This study has produced very strong evidence that the quality of thinking of sixth grade pupils as reflected in the questions they ask can be improved by teaching them about questions and questioning. However, before this information has much impact in classrooms, it is likely we need to communicate the need for persons responsible for the pre-service and in-service education of teachers to include instruction about questions and questioning in their courses and/or workshops and also to serve as role models in their own teaching.

I strongly believe that questions students ask will mirror the kinds of questions their teachers routinely ask. This was readily apparent during the pilot study for this project which was done in the classroom of teachers I know very well. When we were categorizing the questions the children wrote, it was easy for me to guess the homeroom of many of the children because I was familiar with the language patterns of the teacher involved.

Botel (1959) recognizes the quality of questions when he writes:

> Questioning is potentially your most important tool for helping students to understand and to interpret what they read. If the questions you pose are thought provoking and stimulating, your students will grow in their ability to think critically about what they read. On the other hand if your questions are limited to facts and small details, thinking and appreciation may be shallow (p. 30).

But what if children are taught to pose their own questions? Consciously teaching children question/answer relationships is akin to allowing children to ask why we are doing certain activities. I tend to take the offensive and begin by asking, probably right after we have completed an activity such as determining the correct sequential order of 6 or 7 related events or steps in a process, "Why do you think we did this?" The children's responses give me a quick, reliable and revealing sense of their perception of the activity and helps form a position attitude toward what was done. I've done this frequently enough with groups of youngsters so that I'm not shocked or upset when a child asks during some activity, sometimes privately, sometimes as a part of the group, "Why are we doing this?"

Children are very capable of good thinking, asking perception questions, ferreting out implications, making applications, formulating conclusions and making valid predictions and evaluations.

Botel (1959) lists three purposes for thought development questions that I see as significant for teachers and that I think can be taught to children. He says good questions should lead students to:

a. improved observational thinking, i.e., the understanding of what the author is saying directly, his main ideas, the facts he presents to support the main ideas and the organization of these ideas.
b. improved inferential thinking, i.e., the interpretation of implied meanings, the ability to see the author's purpose(s), the ability to predict conclusions from and see applications for the facts.
c. more senstitive appreciations, i.e., the ability to identify with the characters, to sense colors and mood of the story(p. 31).

One of the concerns related to this project was that materials and procedures be easily available to classroom teachers. Selections used were taken from basal readers commonly used in classrooms. Another easily available material that the questioning procedure can be used very successfully with, is the newspaper. Ask children to bring to class newspapers from different

towns or sources of publication. Then have them compare several reports of the same event and note the variations. Much worthwhile decisions will insue. Guide them in evaluating the newspapers reputation for containing "uncolored reports" and on the writers reputation for presenting facts accurately. Encourage children to pick out statements which they think are opinions and statements which they think are facts. Similarly consider several articles by the same columnist and discuss them in terms of his/her personal biases, radical ideas, attempts at sensationalism, propoganda, etc. Magazine articles, pamphlets, flyers and even catalogs can provide inexpensive material to help develop good interpretive and evaluative skills.

Children need to learn to weigh to evaluate with wisdom, rather than with emotions and teachers must recognize and act upon these facts if they are to guide them in the wise way. For in the words of Josiah Royce, "Thinking is like loving and dying. Each of us must do it himself." Only when thinking accompanies recognition of the written symbols has one really learned to "read and heed."

There is a tendency to overlook the primary level when considering matters related to comprehension instruction. Durkin (1978-79) suggests the reason for this is the concern for decoding skills at the level. I think this is a rational reason but I also see opportunity for application of Bruner's famous statement, "Any subject can be taught effectively in some intellectually honest form to any child at any stage of development." Therefore, primary teachers need to be informed of the value of teaching children about questions and questioning and be ready to capitalize on that teachable moment, ready to encourage a skill that may significantly affect the learners attitudes and thinking patterns.

Durkin (1978-79) reports in her research that practically no comprehension instruction was seen and that comprehension assessment was commonly carried out through interrogation. I do not question the validity of that statement but

would like to suggest that both may be accomplished almost simultaneously if the teacher will take time to provide a positive comment (feedback) to a child who has just given a commendable response. "That's a great answer, I like the way you are thinking. You gave such a good answer to my question, could you think of a question about the situation you'd like to ask your classmates? Try to begin your question with 'why' or ask the person to explain their answer."

The children will quickly recognize and react to two things: 1. Careful thinking produces answers that bring words of praise from the teacher--and everyone wants that. 2. Good responses are rewarded by an opportunity to ask a question. And although the teacher has not given any direct instruction in questioning, repetition of the behavior that has been modeled in saying that good questions as well as good answers earn recognition.

I wholeheartedly agree with Durkin's conclusion that adding to teachers' knowledge of what constitutes good instruction is no guarantee of change in instructional procedures, but I am enough of an optimist that I am going to ask that each of you take five minutes during a basal reading lesson next week to model the concept with your class and I'll wager the result will be satisfying enough you'll do it twice the next week and that within four weeks you'll have some alert child saying "I have a question for the other kids"--or maybe "for you." Kids love to put their teachers on the spot and that would be a great opportunity to build some thinking patterns around such signal words as "because of that, for that reason, that is why, in my opinion," etc.

If you should decide on a more direct approach, as was used in this project, I would suggest that some reinforcement be provided in your classes, similar to what I just mentioned, for an extended period of time so that the new skill has plenty of opportunity to become an integral part of the child's thinking habits and of classroom instructional procedures. You will see

implications and applications in other curricular areas such as social studies, science, and even mathematics. I can envision no more stimulating learning environment than one dominated by student generated questions.

Just after World War II a family in the school district in which I was working brought a widowed sister and two small children to Pennsylvania from Greece. When I don't understand something I'm likely to say "It's all Greek to me." In that situation everything was literally "all Greek" and slowly but surely with the help of the sponsoring family and a teacher who lived in the neighborhood, we developed some language facility and the reading process was begun. The children were bright and made rapid progress. The mother found the language adjustment very difficult but was ambitious for her children and instead of asking the usual "what good answers did you give today?" asked "what good questions did you ask today?" What a difference that makes in what you have to talk about at the family supper table!

Effective reading instructional programs that encourage learners to think more creatively by asking questions about what they have been assigned to read may well provide stimuli for additional reading in unassigned sources to satisfy curiosities about other topics. Generating questions may also encourage readers to give more time and attention to selected bits of information and help develop awareness that different types of questions elicit different types of responses.

As I prepared for this presentation I reached to my shelf of professional books and among others that would qualify for "antique" status found a copy of the International Reading Association Conference Proceedings of 1956 edited by William S. Gray and Nancy Larrick.

In this booklet I found a statement by John DeBoer:

> We have been congratulating ourselves upon the fact that the reading abilities of children are on the whole better today than they were in times past. We are justified in stressing

> this when we meet public criticism of current methods of teaching reading. But among ourselves we must face the fact that modern life demands significantly better results than those that may have been considered adequate in past years. If our faith in the democratic process is well founded, our need for vastly improved reading abilities and interests on the part of the people is self-evident. Our world is moving so rapidly that we must run in order merely to stand still (p. 13).

John Naisbeth has characterized the approaching era of our society as the information age. A couple of years ago the father of a student of mine said he was very anxious that his son learn to read well because no matter what he wanted to know about, there was a book written about it. Accompanying the approach of the information society is the exploding array of printed material available at a reasonable price to the general public. It is true of course that people are exposed to much new information orally or visually prior to its being printed but hopefully habits formed to deal with already available printed material will be of assistance in dealing with the unwritten mass of information of the future.

I have emphasized developing children's ability to enter into mental action and reaction with meanings embedded in printed symbols, both those that are immediately apparent and those that require some thinking and synthesization on the part of the child. On-the-spot discussion, guided by a skillful teacher is probably one of the best techniques which can be used for this purpose.

The teacher, however, must prepare carefully for each discussion and be ready with sagacious questions and remarks, ready to follow and guide discussions into proper channels; ready to step back when children are taking over in ways that are conducive to growth in their thinking processes and ready to "step up" when a question or remark will stimulate further mental activity and afford subtle guidance in arriving at a sound judgement.

Discussion of reading content under such conditions well may result in the fullest realizations of Edward Thorndike's terse, but significant definition of some years back, "Reading is thinking."

At a session of a conference of the National Association of Independent Schools in early March, Robert Swartz, a professor of philosophy at the University of Massachusetts in Boston, discussed the role educators can play in fostering the process of critical thinking about current moral and social issues such as the nuclear arms race. He said, "If we in our schools do not do much to help students think through these issues, we are doing them a great disservice."

And just recently I saw a slogan I wish I had been smart enough to create:

Today children depend on us--Tomorrow we will depend on them.

What kind of good questions will you encourage children to ask?

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